

Mentoring Perceptions and Experiences of Culturally Diverse Tenure-accruing Faculty

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The purpose of this study was to explore tenure-accruing foreign national faculty (n =6) members' perceptions of their mentoring perceptions and experiences as they transitioned into the professoriate at a research-intensive university. Using semi-structured interviews and grounded theory, the authors found that not all new faculty had the same level of mentoring support. Moreover, they observed that the university lacked a policy to guide mentoring and other support to the new assistant professors as they transitioned from being a graduate student to becoming a faculty member. The faculty members also report how the varying levels of mentoring impacted their transition. The authors suggest that providing mentors to foreign national faculty might indeed be a wise investment.

Key words: Culturally diverse faculty, foreign-born faculty, grounded theory, mentoring, qualitative research

The lack of apprenticeship or transition time to discover and understand the roles of the profession remains a concern for new higher education faculty (Di Fabio & Bernaud, 2008; Rochlen et al., 1999). Novice professors typically lack clear expectations or a plan of action to guide their progression towards achieving tenure (Greene et al., 2008; Price & Cotten, 2006; Santo et al., 2009; Youn & Price, 2009). Compounding this issue, the transition of new faculty in academia is shrouded in mystery. In the wake of such confusion, a mentor can guide these individuals and provide some much needed direction regarding their journey into a new, uncertain, and demanding environment (Greene et al., 2008; Santo et al., 2009). Instructions or nurturing from senior faculty becomes important because most new faculty find themselves spending too much time on teaching and, while it is highly valued, excellence in teaching alone does not provide job security. Ortlieb, Biddix and Doecker (2010) agree and explain that despite being held in high regard, “without publications, there is no promotion, no tenure, no security, no more teaching, and ultimately no more job” (p. 112).

Studies reveal institutional support is an important requirement for tenure-accruing faculty (Creamer, 1995; Greene et al., 2008; Santo et al., 2009). Mentoring has been found to be one such method of support, especially for foreign national faculty, a group which typically is not as culturally aware of the demands of the U.S. teaching environment (Fink, 1984; Kline & Liu, 2005; Menges, 1999; Sorcinelli, 1994). Research conducted by Greene et al. (2008), illustrates the experiences of 96 respondents who disclosed a variable amount of support, both formal and informal, provided by their educational institutions. Forty-eight (50%) respondents reported having a formal mentor assigned to them, of which only 16 (17%) found the relationship to be helpful. Mentors, according to most of the respondents, were either too busy or lacked interest in the mentee’s research focus and, as such, were not keen to publish with them. Sixty (63%) respondents mentioned that the support that they most needed came from their colleagues, while seventeen (18%) reported receiving “teaching support in the form of workshops, fewer class preparations, course-release time, and peer observation” (p. 436). Ten respondents (10%) conveyed receiving no support or help they found useful.

Similarly, other researchers have identified mentoring as an important ingredient for early career faculty. Santo et al. (2009) explained that organizations that provide “sufficient time, intrinsic motivation, formal mentorship, culture that values research, and a network of external colleagues” (p. 120) were associated with greater research productivity. McCormick and Barnes (2008) identified attributes of helpful mentors as empathetic, patient, honest, and accessible and of good mentees as ambitious, open minded, humble, and appreciative. They felt that such a combination provides honest, supporting, and trusting relationships that facilitate professional growth and development.

Research is the one area where new faculty needs the most support (Greene et al., 2008). In 2008, Greene et al. found that 39% of their respondents indicated that relevant support included having a mentor, writing groups, travel money, grant funding, and research sharing with peers, apart from “course-load reductions, an untenured faculty handbook, administrative support, workshops, clear expectations, and more communication” (p. 437). Some researchers suggest free or release time while acquiring new research skills, graduate assistant support, internal funding opportunities, reduced teaching load, statistical assistance, a support group for research and writing, and faculty professional development (Santo et al., 2009) as other forms of assistance. Assigning mentors for new faculty reduces anxieties, apprehensions and manifests increased satisfaction, motivation, and confidence for pursuing tenure (Dreher & Ash, 1990; Hill, 2009; Lewallen et al., 2003; Price & Cotten, 2006; Santo et al., 2009). Although formal mentoring

relationships are advised, Price and Cotten (2006) also indicate the importance of informal mentoring. Diggs et al. (2009) emphasized both formal and informal mentoring for faculty of color, and suggested that it can lead to greater retention of professors. Despite this call for support, many early career faculty members fail to find this assistance during their employment in institutions of higher education. Emphasizing the same aspect, Ortlieb, Biddix and Doecker (2010) state that despite the enormous pressure to publish, most institutions do not provide necessary scaffolding or mentor new recruits. Instead the prevalent philosophy and corresponding approach has been to throw them in the water and let them sink or swim.

As difficult as this situation is for new faculty, foreign-born faculty have to brave a variety of challenges that are in stark contrast to those faced by local faculty. Slogans like equal employment opportunity (EEO) or moves that espouse support for minority, women, and diverse faculty sound hollow if necessary accommodations/resources are not provided to them (AAG, 2004; Collins, 2008). Since U.S. colleges and institutions vary by size and type, the characteristics inherent in one may be largely different in another. Therefore, a faculty member who acquires a degree from, for example, a Research I university before starting his/her working career in a predominantly teaching university or liberal arts college will most likely find diverse settings and norms prevailing in the new institution (Fink, 1984; Menges, 1999; Sorcinelli, 1992). Foreign national faculty not only have quite different social norms and values coming from other countries, they need to acclimate to the same institutional differences as the local faculty, which makes their settlement that much harder. While referring to individuals coming to the U.S., Kline and Liu (2005) mention, “differing language and cultural values . . . isolation, alienation, and discrimination have all been identified as constructing an environment for higher levels of stress” (2005, p. 369). Collin’s (2008) study supported these assertions. He found that 63% of international faculty reported feeling isolated, which for individuals coming from collectivist cultures (Hofstede, 1991; Spring, 2008) can result in a particularly difficult period of adjustment. Mentoring therefore, can play a very affective role in easing the faculty into the new environment by helping them to adapt to local academic cultures. In this study, foreign national faculty were interviewed to acquire insight about their perceptions of mentoring, and the experiences that they had with a mentor.

Method

Six tenure-accruing foreign national faculty members (three male and three female), located in a large Southeastern university in the U.S., were selected to gain insight about their mentoring perceptions and experiences as they transitioned into the professoriate. There was considerable diversity in the group as individuals hailed from Brazil, South Korea, Colombia, Spain, Guatemala, and India. All study participants initially came to the U.S. to do their graduate work. Having secured their doctorates, each found employment in their current Research I university to perform the triad of responsibilities i.e., research, teaching, and service as part of the professoriate. Their ages ranged between 30 to 44 years, total time spent in the U.S. was 7 to 10 years, and the tenure track period varied from 2 months to a year and a half. Since no single department had enough early career tenure-accruing international professors at the time of this study, deliberative (purposive/purposeful) sampling (Creswell, 2008; Oritz, 2003) was conducted to access the participants. This type of sampling is useful when the researcher's objective is to access sites and participants that are “information rich” (Patton, 1990, p. 169).

The participants were asked to choose their own pseudonyms; some did so while the others left it at the discretion of the researchers. To conduct the study and gain access to the participants, prior approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was received.

Data Collection

Semi structured individual interviews were used because this approach provides “considerable latitude” (p. 94) in probing more deeply into unique participant experiences and for capturing important details (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The participants were interviewed twice. All interviews were audio-taped and field notes were taken to record important nuances as well as keeping the interviews on track (Glesne, 2006; Holstein, 2003). The interviews were transcribed verbatim to capture and explore the themes that emerged from rich thick data sources (Merriam, 1995).

Data Analysis

Grounded theory was used to analyze the data. This theory uses induction, relies primarily on observations to develop understandings, while aiming to construct substantive and formal theory (Charmaz, 2006; Grbich, 2007). Grbich (2007) noted that for small scale environments, when there has been little previous research, grounded theory is the best approach. The constant comparison approach was used with words, lines, sections to compare “incidents to incidents, and incidents to emerging concepts” (p. 72). In order to ensure reliability (i.e., dependability and consistency in this qualitative study) an audit trail and peer examination strategies were employed (Merriam, 1995). Additionally, the use of member checks, where participants reviewed electronic transcripts of their interviews increased the internal validity of research (Merriam, 1995). Member checks ensure the accuracy of transcripts and themes that emerged from the data, and authenticate the findings so that participant views are not misinterpreted.

External validity was enhanced by creating rich thick descriptions through detailed interviews and transcriptions for the reader to consider transferring findings to other similar research institutions (Merriam, 1995). Thick description, as Glesne (2006) states, “goes beyond the mere or bare reporting of an act (thin description), but describes and probes the intentions, motives, meanings, contexts, situations and circumstances of action” (p. 27).

Results

All six participants were asked if they received any formal or informal mentoring support from their departments. Dr. Pele, hailing from Brazil and four months into his tenure, was the most candid of all participants while sharing his mentoring experiences. He laughed a lot and seemed to have adjusted well to the requirements of the professoriate. He supported the notion that as young faculty “you definitely need a mentor”. In his department (Veterinary Medicine), one could actually choose two mentors. He reported,

So you can choose your mentors and one is here in this department, and the other one is in the department of animal science and I have very good relationships with both of them ...

They have one mentor that you choose and they try to find and match you with another person but that's not strict either. They just suggest there is this guy here that does this kind of work, and we guess you guys could collaborate well together.

He pointed out that it was essential that new faculty become proactive in locating and choosing mentors, based on one's preferences. It is especially important for the international faculty to locate someone from the same cultural background. He said,

You have to learn how the system works, how to navigate the system, and that is very

important and it's great I really knew these people beforehand and they are great ... and I find it very easy to work with them ... because I knew these people beforehand. One of them already worked with me while I was doing Ph.D. in another state. The other one I knew his work, then I got here you know I started working with him. They [the department] gave me like two months to ... choose my mentors [and] it was not difficult. Some schools though assign you a mentor because they look at you and they look at these other persons and they may say oh, this is going to be a good match, these two may complement each other.

While he mentioned the benefits of finding mentors that one is familiar with or those from the same culture, it may be conjectured that some personality types may click with even those not representing these characteristics. He endorsed this opinion by mentioning that while he was lucky to have one mentor from his own background, he would have been equally comfortable with a mentor from another place. He said,

Both of my mentors are international, one from Cuba and the other one is from Brazil, I find that easy ... Yeah, I am lucky, I tell you, but if I had to work with a mentor who had been from the U.S. I don't think I would have had many problems. Because as long as you are doing your work, they are very objective, you follow the rules and the protocols and that is all that you have to do. You do fine. Of course it makes it easier if, you know, if you can understand the culture in seniors and all that. It's not strictly work. You have friendship as well. That helps!

In regard to collaboration, he mentioned, "I collaborate with them on lots of the things I do, and that's why I chose them, and they encourage you a lot."

In the second interview, Dr. Pele reinforced what he had earlier shared about having a great time in the department by saying that his mentors not only helped him on departmental issues but were also willing collaborators in research initiatives. He stated,

My mentors are very informal, and meet on a regular basis ... because I work [and], see them every week -- those are not formal meetings but [we] have an agenda ... We just discuss the things that we are working on but not general things. Student issues, research, projects that we are starting, grants that we are submitting, those sort of things ... these faculty are very active, [they] want to be involved in writing proposals and grants, they want to collaborate, and that's really priceless.

As to whether someone else in his position would have been just as fortunate and successful, he explained that knowing his mentors before joining his department was a big advantage.

The better you know your network before you start on tenure the better it is. The more people you know, more people you can collaborate with.... And in my place, if they had hired somebody else who did not know the same people that I knew then the same environment would have been a lot harder for that person. A friend of mine at Ohio State started his tenure track and did not know anybody. He was the only assistant professor and everybody else was a full professor. They don't want to start [something new because} they were already pretty much done, so he had to build his program from scratch and by himself. So I feel very fortunate here.

Not all the faculty members, however, received mentors after joining their departments. Some, instead, relied on informal mentors. Dr. Chi, a South Korean working in the Microbiology department mentioned that,

I have not been assigned a mentor as yet, but actually I have a very good role model as an informal mentor. He just got tenured last year and he gets me the tenure package on what

he did and he suggested me to attend a tenure promotion seminar, so he is kind of mentoring me.

She was hopeful that she would soon be selecting her mentoring committee,

When I first joined, the department chair asked me [regarding] a mentoring committee and who [would] I want to be in that committee. So I asked one senior scientist in our department and the other young scientist, and there should be one more, so three people become members of the mentoring committee for the new faculty in our department. I think they haven't started [the committee] yet.

When asked about the frequency of meetings with the mentoring committee, she mentioned that "they are starting to think who is on my mentoring committee, so it is not active yet." At this point, only the committee composition had been determined. In the second interview she identified the ranks of the committee members, "So I have one associate and two senior professors in the committee. Actually that was good." She went on to say, "I think maybe [we will meet] once or twice a year but the good thing is that I can knock on their doors and ask whenever I need, so it's good, yeah". Hofstede (1991), however, notes that individuals from collectivist cultures relate strongly to power distance and, as such, unless the seniors provide access to the juniors they generally shy away from interactions or meetings. Hence the assumption that individuals would take self-initiative to approach authority seems a little doubtful, unless the authority figure, at least initially, makes concerted efforts to break that barrier or set that practice.

Dr. Hayek from Columbia, a professor in the Economics department, had a totally different experience regarding mentoring assignments. When asked if he had a formal mentor, he remarked,

Mentor, mentor, no, not really. Well there is another professor who was teaching the classes I am teaching now ... he is a very nice person. I have had lunch with him, he tells me ideas, and sends me material... so advice...of course, but informally, not like a mentor.

He reported having some helpful colleagues in the department, "... anytime I need help with something, I just talk to people and they come up with something." In the follow up interview he shared that he still did not have a mentor formally assigned to him. Also, he pointed out that he could not find any departmental policy, which suggested that he would receive a formal mentor.

Dr. Rajeshvari from India, also in the Economics department, mentioned that she did not have an assigned mentor either,

Well we have a mentoring committee comprising three people. So I don't have one person but when you do your annual reports you have a mentoring committee and they go through it and give you suggestions.

She pointed out that the department selected the mentoring committee. When asked if she met with them on regular basis, or when she needed to, she declared that she met the committee only once a year. In regard to meeting with any of the committee members she mentioned, "I think you can go meet them if you want to, I have not gone to meet them, but, you can if you want." Dr. Rajeshvari is also from a collectivist country (India). Her lack of intentions to meet seniors, of her own volition, signals a cultural and personality inhibition. To a question about whether the committee could meet her other than during the annual meeting, she said,

They would not call me unless they think there is a matter of concern and so I don't think they would call me. They don't call anybody unless they see something really startling; ... so basically you have to submit your annual report every year, what you did, they go

through it, and then they say these are the weak areas, these are strong areas, maybe you should work on these areas. Or they say, this is not good, you should work harder, you know, ... basically they give you a direction where you are going, and you might not get tenure or you might get tenure. I mean they can never say you might get tenure, but they can tell you when you will not get tenure.

During the second interview she was asked if she had something else to report on mentoring, she mentioned that nothing had changed and that she had not met any members of her mentoring committee in the interim period.

Dr. Illa who is from Spain was one and a half years into the tenure track in the Spanish department. During the first interview, she explained that she was fortunate to have a good mentor who is an American; however, she was still facing problems learning the ropes in her department. She said,

I have a good mentor that I can ask a lot of things, but sometimes you just don't know, so you can't ask about things that you don't know. I feel a little lost like with grants. Like they sent us an email saying that now you can apply for this grant and I don't even know if I can apply to these grants. So I send an email asking, can I apply as a pre-tenured faculty too. When we go to the meetings, when we are talking about the by-laws and all those things, they are completely above my head, so I feel a little disoriented in that sense.

Her mentor had recently been promoted as the Chair of the department, which meant that she needed to have another mentor. To her, having a mentor facilitates knowing the ropes, culture, and processes in the university,

Your mentor cannot also be your chair, so I need to find a new mentor but there is nobody that is tenured in linguistics. I will probably need to find somebody in literature which is fine because in general the questions are more about culture, and how things here in the university work, I never know how administration works. This is the part that is completely different from being a grad student – and [it] takes a lot of work.

Two months later, by the second interview, she still had not found the replacement for her previous mentor, “No I am still waiting. Yeah I need to bring it up by the end of the semester. I will have to show them the urgency and say, ‘Ok, it's over, and I need a new mentor’ ”.

Dr. Peja from Guatemala, six months into his tenure track period in the Microbiology department, seemed quite satisfied with the mentoring that he was receiving. He mentioned that he had an assigned mentor who met him at least once a week and who was very helpful. He found the meetings to be quite useful.

With my mentor we have chatted many times about future directions and on what to focus and grants and also received a fully paid a one day workshop on how to write a proposal. That was very helpful, and lots of information.... My mentor also brought one of the program directors for the programs I am interested in here and he set up an appointment with him and so we chatted a little bit about my interests and he gave advice on future directions and what to do, when to do, what not to do, and so it was very helpful.

In the second interview Dr. Peja once again mentioned the close collaboration that he was enjoying with his mentor in research activities which, he stated “were of immense value”.

Discussion

From the participants' responses, it is clear that there is no single policy that the university follows in terms of providing necessary support, guidance, or mentoring opportunities to new

faculty members. No special accommodations were provided to the international faculty, and none would be forthcoming to ease the local faculty members into their new responsibilities of the professoriate either. These findings echo what others have reported, that no extraordinary support is provided for faculty whether they matriculated from U.S. universities or abroad (Kline & Liu, 2005; Menges, 1999; Sorcinelli, 1992).

Two of the six participants seemed to have had a good mentoring relationship. One of them, Dr. Pele, most likely would have done well in any situation. He was proactive, had prior networking relationships with his mentor, is collaborating well with both his current mentors, and managing his time well in academia. In response to questions on time management, he shared that he is used to waking up early and starting the workday ahead of others in his department. Owing to that early and undisturbed start he is able to finish his work and leave the office promptly at 5:00 pm and give undivided time to his family. For him, it is all about balancing one's responsibilities. He probably was not the typical new faculty member who was generally overwhelmed in the early part of his/her career in academia (Ortlieb, Biddix, & Doecker, 2010). Dr. Peja on the other hand has been quite fortunate to have a mentor who helped him in his work and was also conscious of his development. His mentor even extended himself to ensure that he created other learning opportunities for him.

The South Korean, Indian, and Columbian faculty members, all of who belonged to collectivist environments (Hofstede, 1991; Spring, 2008) were not provided with regular mentoring. While Dr. Chi does not have a mentor, the other two professors have mentoring committees who only oversee their end of the year evaluation reports and do not make contacts during the year. In the words of Dr. Chi, "when I came to this department and did not receive any orientation, office support, office supplies, and mentoring help, I thought, ok, so it is the survival game, and realized after the first month that I was on my own, in an environment totally different than my home country [South Korea]". The other participant from Spain has not had a mentor since her previous mentor became the department chair.

International faculty members who come from diverse backgrounds need varied support to fulfill their social, legal, economic, and institutional requirements. Senior faculty might consider reaching out and providing the necessary support which foreign nationals need to assist them as they settle in their new found roles. This is especially true in Research I universities that typically have heavy expectations of research production in addition to teaching and service. Acclimating to the new position, although it is a considerable part of their transition, does not mitigate the challenges that are involved with other matters pertaining to the transition.

From the findings it is clear that not all faculty members received the same or similar type of mentoring support. Receiving mentor support only at the end of the academic year may later be called into question if the new faculty does not successfully attain tenure. Moreover, losing a faculty member at the end of a tenure-accruing period can result in the loss of significant intellectual and financial investment to the institution, a lack of scientific progress for the faculty member, and interrupt students' research progress. Thus, providing mentor support for tenure-accruing faculty seems to be a wise investment for all and advisable for department chairs to ensure that the same is provided to the new faculty (Moss et al., 1999).

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